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ABSTRACT

This paper stresses the potentially enormous power of new communications technology and urges communicators to use this power cautiously and wisely. Among the topics considered are the power potential of using communication satellites; the conflict in developing countries between the concept of free communication and the need to protect a people or a culture from harmful outer influences; the occasionally disastrous results of transferring television instruction from one country to another; the importance of considering the costs of communications technology; possible dangers of a one-way flow of information and the desirability of establishing two-way communication; and two recent experiences in obtaining direct telephone response from television audiences. (GW)

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THE WORLD OF THE WORD

AN ADDRESS BY

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BOSTON, MASS.

AUGUST 12, 1976

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Thank you Betsy, and thanks to all of you for the privilege of being with you this morning.

I express those thanks sincerely although I am uncomfortably aware of standing before you in what might be considered high season on keynote speakers. And there are a few of those who have obviously given their first and their last. Since I am wedged between the Democratic and Republican Party conventions, you may expect me to ring the bell for challenge, sound the gong for opportunity and toll the death knell for injustice. Fear not. I will leave those sound effects to the politicians.

This Congress is not a political convention and you are not politicians. But as public relations practitioners you are versed in persuasion, albeit gentle -- and are familiar enough with exhortation to recognize and reject empty promises.

My modest purpose as your keynote speaker is to suggest that you who use the word -- and, I trust, also lovers of the word -- are on

the threshold of having to face some interesting -- even profound -- decisions.

Note that I said "the word" and not "the printed word," even though I have been in the printed word business for 38 years and rather firmly believe that centuries of esteem will continue to give the printed word a particular authority. But for 20 of those years I have concurrently been involved in radio and TV and, more recently, in cable and satellite communications. I believe that whatever the medium -- the word -- the message -- remains paramount in communications. But I have also seen the impact, the influence of the physical transmitter of that word.

Less than a year ago a subsidiary of Time Inc., Home Box Office, became the first company to use a communications satellite for the regular transmission of pay television programs. At the time of the first satellite delivered program Home Box Office had 176,000 subscribers. But that leap to a satellite 22,300 miles out in space captured the imagination of cable operators and TV viewers across the country.

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Today HBO has over half a million subscribers and is still growing.

So I know first hand that the use of satellites represents a quantum jump for communications comparable to the printing press, the telegraph, radio and television. For the first time in history a worldwide audience at the same instant can see and hear a speaker or a program. Imagine the power-potential of that speaker, the immense effect that can flow from such a program.

Add to that notion two-way communication between programmer and audience. A sort of "instant reply." Such immediate response from the viewer will be technically feasible within a decade. The old "thumbs up" or "thumbs down" of the Roman Colosseum upon which the life of the gladiator depended will be played in a worldwide arena before hundreds of millions of telespectators. A spur to accomplishment -- or an invitation to demagoguery? Here in America, what kind of political conventions will we have -- indeed what kind of political campaigns -- when such a development comes to pass?

Communications have traditionally played a shaping role in

society. A handful of magic words known only to shamans and witch doctors gave them great power. From the darkened caves of ancient Egypt to the monasteries of medieval Europe, rulers and monks jealously guarded the art of writing -- as well as the available writing materials -- for the authority they represented. The printing press helped topple feudalism and prepare the way for an industrial revolution which rose to its zenith with inexpensive paper, telegraph and telephone. Television, which raised expectations to a historic flash point, has played a large role in leading developed countries to a post-industrial society.

But if the power of communications is nothing new, the immensity of the power that is beginning to be available has no precedent. It's like going almost overnight from gunpowder to nuclear fission, with comparable possibilities for good or for evil. And it will result, in the words of one observer, in "an accumulation of a critical mass of human attention and impulse that up to now has been inconceivable."

If I seem to be exaggerating the power of new communications technology, let me quote from a very different source, a White Paper

published in Japan several years ago. "It is our conclusion," the White Paper spelled out, "that Japan has to change its goal from industrialization to informationalization in order to prevent social and economic problems caused by the extension of industrialization... We propose that the final national goal be a new information society."

Here in the United States, the Conference Board, a business research organization, drawing upon expertise from industry and academia, has reported that the business of communications in the near future could become bigger than the steel or automobile industries.

This even greater power of modern communications makes it imperative that we reexamine some assumptions that have become shibboleths, foremost among them "the freedom to communicate."

One of America's great gifts to the world has been its tradition of a free press. The principal architect of the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson, expressed his belief in that freedom this way: "When the press is free and every man able to read, all is safe."

More than 150 years later the United Nations affirmed that belief in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression...and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers."

Although pious affirmations of that UN declaration have been made repeatedly since its issuance, frontal attacks on the press have not been lacking. We in the United States have witnessed a barrage of anti-press rhetoric from some of the highest officials sworn to defend the free press. And not long ago in France we had the spectacle of President De Gaulle recognizing freedom for newspapers but openly boasting that radio and television, "c'est moi."

I think we all believe with Thomas Jefferson that a free press and universal education are safeguards of democracy and when infringed upon, democracy is impaired. But if developed countries like the United States and France have difficulties maintaining press freedom, the developing countries have some very special problems -- the solving

of which apparently include a reevaluation of the concept of free communication.

One Third World leader, for example, has pointed out that "the most significant dimension of effort in the poorer countries is the challenge to mould the people into a nation and the struggle to free the nation from poverty. It may well be," he continues, "that in such conditions the traditional adversary posture of the Western press, which implies continual questioning and criticism of all formal authority, is inappropriate to the overriding need for national unity and national survival."

What he rather heavy-handedly implies is that free access to information within his nation and its dissemination without must be curbed. The fact that democratic countries traditionally trim freedom of access during a time of war is his precedent. Many developing nations obviously believe they are in a state of war.

In such countries, the feeling that the press needs to have its wings clipped is a philosophy now known as "developmental communications."

We are going to hear more and more about it in the near future and I believe that the tremendous power of communications technology to which I have referred makes this philosophy more understandable -- and at the same time it presents us with a paradox. We stand for freedom of information. At the same time we must respect anyone's right not to be communicated to. If developmental communications is nothing more than camouflage for a government press agency trying to look like a free press, that, by our standards, is wrong. But if it has legitimate aspects -- such as protection of a people or a culture from harmful outer influence -- that we must, if grudgingly, accept. But if developmental communications simplistically refers to press freedom as "an exposed vestige of colonialism," or totally bars access to the news or news sources as a matter of policy, we must condemn it.

At the same time we must remember that even under the best conditions and in the most liberal of societies restraints on communications freedom exist that we, as defenders of freedom, seldom question. It

may seem a small matter, but in many countries, for example, anyone who is arrested is allowed one phone call. That, of course, is a large improvement over none and a vast one over torture. But is it good enough? It restricts free communications. We have larger examples, too, in the refusal of television stations to carry certain programs and of newspapers and magazines to run certain stories which might offend viewers, readers or advertisers. We have, too, libel and obscenity laws, many of which are in constant course of revision, reflecting uncertainty about where such abridgements begin and end.

So before we reject out of hand the right not to be communicated to, let us not forget the constraints, blemishes and barriers that pass in silence in developed countries. Let us remember, too, that an excess of communications can cause stress and anxiety, and that what is normal in one society may be dangerously stressful in another. The flow of international communications is heavily from West to East, sometimes so heavily that it threatens to overwhelm the system, and a society.

So we have first of all to accept the rights of those who either

pragmatically or instinctively want to protect themselves from the powerful new communications directed at them -- you might call it an other-directed imposition of technology -- which in many cases is neither needed nor wanted. We must further examine the technology of communications carefully so we can use it intelligently, not just because it is there. Indiscriminate use of scientific know-how, so often racing ahead of man's understanding of it, can produce effects clearly opposite to those intended. There are cultures existent on this planet which have moved not from the wheel to the printed word but from the wheel directly to color television.

For example, television instruction is transferred from one country to another with results ranging from ludicrous to disastrous. To show farmers how to produce bigger and better crops from seeds which are unobtainable produces real frustration. To show mothers how to wash a baby in a fashion that violates all kinds of taboos in their society leads to anger and anxiety. To instruct a woman in cooking and nutrition through the use of a variety of cooking utensils she has never

seen or even heard of distracts her attention and increases her discontents. These and a multitude of similar mistakes are made because the technology is there and the monster must be fed.

More generally, even programs which avoid this kind of cross-cultural rough riding may raise the problem of how you keep people in rural areas after they've seen TV. Urban backgrounds in films are exciting and seductive, but the last thing most developing countries need is more farmers and peasants flooding into the cities.

Even a TV program like Sesame Street, acclaimed for teaching children how to read in this country, was turned down by England's BBC because the cultural differences were too great. In England!!

Sesame Street was a success in Mexico but a disaster in Ethiopia.

Sometimes concepts or symbols which would seem universal simply are not. Donald Duck, for example, has entertained audiences of all kinds in countries all around the world. Yet in one African country where Donald was used to teach the military, soldiers threw stones at the film because they thought they were being ridiculed. "Whoever saw

a duck in uniform," was their angry response to Donald in olive drab.

In addition to preserving cultural integrity, all countries -- but especially developing ones -- must ask themselves whether the new technology is worth the cost and is appropriate to the purpose. My emphasis on developing countries may, I know, be interpreted by some as a vestigial imperialistic desire to keep developing countries culturally deprived. I have no such desire. The fact is, however, that teachers and communicators are learning from actual experience that the rush to television may be inappropriate -- that color as well as movement may be distractions to understanding. So, too, may be the inability of a viewer to respond because he is an immobilized spectator before a moving image.

Broadcasters and educators in many countries note increasing evidence that television cannot teach effectively unless its programs are available as recordings, to be used by a teacher at a time suitable to the particular classroom situation. That means, of course, significant expenditures for video recorders, tape and cassette libraries, and

maintenance technicians.

Overemphasis on education without live teachers, the United States Surgeon General has pointed out, invites trouble. In his words, the child who watches television has no need to plan what he will do next, or how he will carry out his plan of action. There is no way he can change the pace of the action on television or divert the inexorable unfolding of events before him. Whether he smiles or frowns, whether he looks puzzled or enlightened, whether he shows amusement or fright, whether he approves or disapproves, the events roll on." So says the Surgeon General.

Since May of 1974 a NASA satellite known as ATS-6 has been in use for communications purposes in Alaska, Appalachia and the Rocky Mountain area. Currently it is being used in India for agricultural education, family planning and other educational TV programming. Both in this country and in India the technology has performed beautifully.

But the actual communications have often been another story.

Programming difficulties of the kind I've referred to keep popping up --

or down. The one-way flow of information has frequently confused teachers and students. Scheduling and coordination dictated by the exigencies of the satellite rather than the needs of its audience have resulted in a great deal of administrative interchange for which the ATS-6 satellite had to be used. Some observers, in fact, believe that the administrators learned more than the audience. In fact, critics have called it "the pork barrel in the sky."

None of this is to denigrate satellites, which are having and will have a tremendous impact on our society. What I am suggesting is a cautious embrace, not always the most satisfying kind, but sometimes wiser. If we recognize the difficulties, we can ride that tiger in the sky. If not, we will be spun around in a dizzying, possibly fatal, orbit.

I have mentioned the growing importance that specialists who use satellites are attaching to response and feedback. But the necessity of a two-way flow goes beyond learning -- it appears to be societal. It may well account for the sudden mushrooming of Citizens Band radio, that two-way talkie-talkie that now has an ever increasing

number of communicators. CB radio makes it clear that a great many people are tiring of being talked at. They want to talk back. Our highways are becoming the Salons of the Seventies.

Talking back is undoubtedly one of the reasons why the future of cable TV is so bright, and if you will forgive my being parochial, I'd like to mention two of Time Inc.'s recent experiences in direct electronic response. The first involves cable television in Manhattan, where public access channels, made available at no cost to community groups and civic leaders, have reached out for viewer participation. And viewers have responded with great enthusiasm. City Councilmen have appeared regularly and established two-way communication by phone during their appearances. This kind of participatory programming, feedback programming, adds a special quality to cable TV, making it a community communications instrument in a new and important way.

Our other recent experience of two-way communications comes from Home Box Office, Time Inc.'s pay TV programming network to which I referred earlier. This summer HBO telecast two episodes of a TV series called "Beacon Hill," a series with a backdrop here in Boston

that was considered unsuccessful and canceled before the two episodes were shown. Home Box Office viewers were asked to telephone their opinion of the episodes and of the series and asked whether they thought "Beacon Hill" should have been taken off the air. The response was far greater than we had expected, over 50,000 viewers, 14,000 in one prime time evening, a number many times greater than that used in deciding to cancel the series. In a sense this HBO experiment was feedback piggybacked on feedback, since "Beacon Hill" itself was created in direct response to the similar BBC program "Upstairs, Downstairs." And not to leave in suspense those of you who know "Beacon Hill," our response was 40,467 to 9,861 in favor of the series.

During the next few days you will be peering into the future with speakers who are far more expert than I on what technology holds in store. I, a layman, have tried to indicate the enormous power that communications technology, at least, will put into our hands. I have also tried to suggest what futurologists sometimes overlook -- the real danger that we might fall into technology's clutches. By

using communications technology indiscriminately, or by foisting it on others who are unready for it, we incur grave risks. The proper conditions of technology, someone has said, is servitude. The fact is, however, that servants often control and slaves frequently corrupt their master.

Not too many years ago a number of our larger corporations used to advertise variations of the idea that they were engaged in putting science at the service of man. "Better living through chemistry" and "progress is our most important product" were examples of that theme. In those days when we had almost unlimited expectations of technology all that was very believable. "Research and development" were buzz words and many companies vied with one another and even with government to boast about what they were doing in "R & D." Today that ecstasy of not too many years ago seems almost...well, quaint.

But in our seeming disillusionment with science and technology, the pendulum may temporarily have swung too far the other way. For a

few years fright replaced euphoria. Learned professors, as well as their students, became flower children.

I think we are now approaching a balance. We are not going to become either technochildren or flower children. And whatever the communications delivery system, we will remain children of the word.

Those delivery systems include, of course, print, which quietly transports to each of us the delights, the grace, the beauty of the WORD. The more the world around us changes the more we find ourselves expressing that "universal human yearning for something permanent, something enduring." Reading and writing, next to talking and eating, is man's most common activity. Despite the electronic age and its concomitant marvels, we still give, and get, the message most often by the sight of type on the printed page.

For the most part we take for granted the power of print -- maybe because it has been always with us. But every now and then someone puts pen to paper, reminding us of that exciting mental pursuit called

reading -- and the subsequent effect of written words on a person's perceptions, decisions or actions.

Think for a moment of the unimaginable frustration of not being able to read or to write. What a joyless condition that would be. Think also of the enormous responsibility we who use professionally the written word must bear. Certainly no less than those who communicate through wire or ether, by satellite or micro-wave.

Andrei Amalrik, who recently emigrated to the West from the Soviet Union, wrote that in order to live under Stalinism, six precepts had been essential. "Don't think. If you think, don't speak. If you write, don't publish. If you publish, don't sign. And if you sign, recant."

I'd like to suggest six precepts for those of us who live with -- not under -- modern communications technology. "Think. Discard bias. Adapt for preconceptions. Choose the words. Select the messenger. Then communicate." That may seem a slow process. It should be no slower than a reflex.

Technology, according to Arnold Toynbee, is nothing more than "a long Greek name for a few tools." To some, however, the tool box often seems to belong to a family named Pandora. It need not. And it better not. For the tools, like words, are weapons much too powerful to play games with. If what's past is in any sense prophecy, new communications technology working with words, will inexorably alter the status quo. As communicators you will help manage the alterations. I urge you to use these powerful tools thoughtfully. The name stenciled on the tool box must not be Pandora, but Mankind.

I thank you and I wish you a rewarding Congress.